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FM AMCONSUL CALCUTTA  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 1196  
INFO RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI PRIORITY 1064  
RUEHCG/AMCONSUL CHENNAI 0423  
RUEHBI/AMCONSUL MUMBAI 0423  
RUEHKA/AMEMBASSY DHAKA 0258  
RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU 0258  
RUEHLM/AMEMBASSY COLOMBO 0093  
RUCPDO/DEPT OF COMMERCE WASHINGTON DC  
RUEHRC/DEPT OF AGRICULTURE WASHINGTON DC  
RUEHCI/AMCONSUL CALCUTTA 1463

UNCLAS CALCUTTA 000454

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SENSITIVE  
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E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [ECON](#) [EIND](#) [EINV](#) [PGOV](#) [IN](#)

SUBJECT: STATEWIDE STRIKE IN WEST BENGAL EXTENDS THE HOLIDAY WITH  
LITTLE REAL EFFECT

REF: CALCUTTA 0453

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: On October 9, the All-India Trinamul Congress (AITC), the state's main opposition party, called a 12-hour general strike, forcing closed most business and government offices in West Bengal. The strike was called to protest the West Bengal's government's acquisition of fertile agricultural land for a Tata Motors automobile factory (reftel). The AITC also wanted to highlight a police crackdown last week on Trinamul senior leadership who had gathered at Singur (about 45 miles Northwest of Calcutta) to protest against the automobile project. Both sides claimed victory after the strike. The AITC argued that the strike symbolized public opinion against the state government's actions, while the ruling Left Front claimed that people had rejected the Trinamul's "anti-industry" stand by maintaining "business as usual." Coming on the heels of a Friday local holiday, observation of the strike by the general public was more a case of extending a long weekend holiday, rather than an indicator of support for the AITC's efforts. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (U) The 12-hour strike in West Bengal, or "bandh" in local parlance, started at 6 am. Political workers from the AITC clashed with the police at several places as the demonstrators tried to stop trains, cars and public transport carrying commuters to work. A few buses and cars were damaged and 6,000 AITC workers were arrested. Although train stations and airports were open, travelers found it difficult to reach downtown after arriving in the city as very few taxis and buses were available. However, Calcutta's burgeoning IT conclave in Salt Lake Sector V was relatively unaffected, with the state government and IT companies taking adequate measure to run their 24 W 7 operations. IT workers arrived at their offices in advance of the strike's start time. Media reports also indicated that the tea gardens in North Bengal remained open. However, attendance in Calcutta's offices was low, with only 50 percent of people showing up for work at the state's administrative headquarters. Schools and colleges remained closed, with some students still on vacation after the festive season.

¶4. (U) West Bengal's Opposition leader and a senior AITC member told post that his party was able to drive home the popular resentment against the state government's anti-farmers' policy. He said although his party was not against setting up industries, it was certainly opposed to the process of the land acquisition at Singur (reftel). He downplayed the significance of the IT sector's avoidance of the strike, and stated that the AITC was satisfied with the outcome. He went on to say that

the AITC will continue to agitate until the state government changes its policy on acquiring agricultural land for industrial development.

¶5. (U) The AITC's claim of victory is exaggerated, considering key businesses and public facilities continued to operate. In addition, many workers chose not to go to work as the bandh came on the heels of a Friday holiday for Lakshmi Puja. Low office attendance was less a reflection of the AITC's strength and more a case of people enjoying a four-day holiday.

¶6. (SBU) COMMENT: However, the issue of agricultural land for industrialization does resonate in West Bengal; a state with a significant agriculture sector. Even within the Left Front, the ruling coalition is struggling with an internal debate over this land question. A senior Communist Party of India - Marxist (CPM) leader and West Bengal's Minister for Land said that although land was needed for setting up industries, Singur is a lesson for the government that it must be sensitive to farmers' interests. The bandh also revealed that W. Bengal is still beset by the use of general strikes as the continuation of politics by other means. Both the Opposition and ruling Left Front use bandhs as a form of economic extortion to achieve political ends, without consideration for the serious damage that it does to the state's economic development. The Leftist unions will have a chance to wreak their havoc (and test Left Front unity), when the unions conduct a planned bandh on November 29.

JARDINE